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PREPAREDNESS IS MILITARISM

BY OSWALD GARRISON VILLARD,
New York Evening Post, New York City.

The significance of preparedness, we are told, lies merely in the fact that Americans believe that our experiment in democracy is the most precious thing on earth; that it is of greater moment to all the world than any other experiment in human government, and that for it Americans are as ready and as willing to die as were their fathers in 1861 and their forefathers in the Revolution. "Life," remarked to me the other day one who sits in the seats of the mighty, "is but a beautiful adventure, to be flung away for an ideal whenever the hour calls." So we must be ready to count no cost should the enemy be at the door, particularly if that enemy should be one who typifies the greatest military efficiency the world has ever seen, who believes its experiment in monarchical socialism of far greater value to humanity than our own brand of democracy, but combines within itself a military autocracy we hold to be the greatest menace to mankind in modern times.

And so we are counselled to take from our possible enemy the very things that have made him efficient and dangerous and become efficient and dangerous ourselves. Not that we shall ever make war—*pace* 1846 and 1898—on anybody; merely that we shall follow in the footsteps of those who believe that the earth is ruled by fear, and that there is no other way to preserve peace than by being so armed that no one shall venture to attack us. And so we have gone about getting a "preparedness" which we are strenuously but falsely pretending will be ours when the legislation now before Congress passes, and so protect us at the close of the war in Europe, and even safeguard us should the present difficulties with Germany result in hostilities. As a matter of fact, the army reorganization proposed will not be consummated for five years, nor the naval program until 1925 or 1927, by which time the present war will be fading into the background like the earthquakes at St. Pierre and Messina and San Francisco and other great and horrible convulsions of nature, and new world-problems will be upon us.

Now, the real significance of this is that we have all at once, in the midst of a terrifying cataclysm, abjured our faith in many things American. We no longer believe, as for 140 years, in the moral power of an America unarmed and unafraid; we believe suddenly that the influence of the United States is to be measured only by the number of our soldiery and our dreadnaughts—our whole history to the contrary notwithstanding. The ardent efforts of both sides in the present European struggle at the outbreak of the war to win for their cause the enormous prestige of the sympathy and moral support of the United States—although “unprepared”—we overlook as if it were not the most outstanding fact of the year from August 1, 1914, to August 1, 1915. We are to deprive the world of the one great beacon-light of a nation unarmed and unafraid, free from the admitted evils of militarism. We are to complete the vicious military circle of the world, so that, if we do not desist, if the oppressed of the nations do not rise in revolt against the whole accursed military system, the United States will be doing more than any other nation to intensify the race between peoples as to which will be armed most and at the greatest cost, and it will be one of the most hated and dreaded. As Lord Rosebery has said, nothing since the beginning of the war has been as discouraging, for in Mr. Wilson's advocacy of our new policy there has not been up to this hour one single phase to the effect that the United States will be ready and eager to lead the way to disarmament at the close of the war, and our five year naval program, as its terms signify, is a program for preparedness years hence.

Next, the preparedness policy signifies an entire change in our attitude towards the military as to whom we inherited from our forefathers suspicion and distrust. A cardinal principle of our polity has always been the subordination of the military to the civil authority as a necessary safeguard for the republic, particularly in our national councils, and as to all matters affecting national policy. Today, in our sudden worship of the expert in uniform, we are told that what we need is a national council of defence comprising, as one rear-admiral suggests and some of our new-born leagues of safety advise, fifteen military and naval officers with only seven civilians graciously given places at the council board. These men, it appears, sitting in secret session and responsible only to themselves, are to formulate the policies of the nation, congressmen to have no

other function than to vote the necessary money, ships and men, it not being theirs to reason why. In other words, the council is to be our Great General Staff, and, like its German prototype, it is to make our Congress vote first like the Reichstag and ask questions afterwards—the questions to be answered only if the council deems it wise. Its members are not to be elected, but are to be designated by act of Congress once for all.

Already it is openly stated in the press that the power of the secretary of the navy is to be curtailed by the present Congress, so that he shall not be able to overrule the naval men, thus putting the military directly above the civil. For this purpose the undeserved unpopularity of the present secretary of the navy is being cleverly exploited, while the public is kept in ignorance of the fact that England, the greatest and most efficient naval power on earth, has never, not even in its direst hour, yielded to the navalists, but has kept the control of the fleets in the hands of its civilian Lords of the Admiralty. Simultaneously we hear demands that only our future admirals and generals, and no civilians, shall be permitted to be our secretaries of the navy and of war.

But our sudden worship of the military does not end here. In New York the legislature has just established military drill in all the boys' schools, while all boys between the ages of fifteen and nineteen not at work are to go to camp as soldiers in the summer. There was no public demand for this bill, but the militia wished it, and through it went. Not even in Germany has such a step been advocated, for there, in the home of militarism, gymnastic exercises have been recognized as better preparation for life and military service than military drill. It goes without saying that the smattering of military knowledge the boys will acquire will be of the slightest value, since it is not planned to let them live in trenches, handle bombs, or distribute liquid fire and poisonous gases, and the instruction is bound to be highly superficial. The bill was not debated, and is in its form a model of how not to legislate. It strikes deliberately at one of the most sacred American liberties—the right of freedom of thought, of action, and of conscience—since it excepts not even Quakers, as even England excepts them today. It goes without saying that we of New York owe this favor entirely to the German General Staff. Yet are we told that militarism has and can have no foothold among us! As a matter of fact, we are

assured not only that the soldier and the sailor are as infallible as the Pope at Rome, but similarly beyond criticism. Let a civilian refer to the immorality of our army, which has been officially denounced by a Republican secretary of war as worse than that of any other army in the world, and the military men in his audience rise and break up the meeting—precisely as British soldiers in England have discredited their uniforms by refusing to allow orderly meetings held to discuss peace to exercise the historic Anglo-Saxon right of free speech.

The publication of a statement, erroneously attributed to a well-known socialist, reflecting so grossly and unjustly upon the army as to defeat its own purpose, results in an appeal by military officers to the postmaster-general for its exclusion from the mail, which action is taken. The German General Staff would have done no less and would have accomplished the same. There is a deep significance in the demand by the *New York Times*, now one of the most ultra-conservative class organs in the world, that protestants against preparedness should not be allowed to speak in public after the President made his first public utterance for preparedness. It is of the utmost significance as also showing that, as in Europe, free speech is in danger when it comes to the criticising of the military class and its program. So the *Seven Seas*, the organ of the Navy League, has recently demanded that Congressman Kitchin be not allowed to speak on the floor of the House because of his opposition to a vast navy, which navy, a contributor to this same journal says, shall have no higher aim than to seize for us the lands of weaker peoples wherever they may be found. Already some of our Tory newspapers have begun to admit that there is a military party in this country—a military party suddenly raised up to add one more to the innumerable problems of race, of labor, of capital, of church, and all the rest with which the country is afflicted. If further proof were needed that we are well along the road towards militarism, it surely lies in the recent demand for the dismissal of the assistant secretary of labor because he thinks soldiers a feudal anachronism. Further instances could be multiplied; it is only necessary to recall the fierce outburst of indignation at the labor leader who dared to say that the working people in this country were not sufficiently well governed to make them care to fight for their government and their country.

Now, if our military and naval experts were the shining lights they pretend to be, why is it that by their own admissions they have made ducks and drakes of their own army and navy? The maladministration of our submarines cannot, for instance, be laid at the doors of the civilian control of the Navy Department or those of Congress; nor can the inefficiency of our regiments be attributed to the fact that the secretary of war is not a military man. That an American cavalry regiment can have its own machine guns stolen from it through the culpable neglect of its officers, and that this same regiment can, a couple of years later, be surprised in its camp, lose a hundred horses, and be unable to shoot off its machine guns because of the dark or to protect the lives of its own men and neighboring citizens, might surely give pause to some of the War College strategists who are so certain of their competency in their own trade as to believe that they are better qualified to advise the nation as to its national and international policies than anybody else who has never studied the art of war.

The truth is that there are no experts the world over so utterly discredited as the military ones. It was the all-wise German General Staff that urged the greatest political blunder of modern times, the invasion of Belgium, as it was the German Navy Staff which ordered the sinking of the *Lusitania* and thereby horrified the world by this unparalleled act of barbarism. The generals who began this war to the world—where are most of them? Where are the Austrian and Russian generalissimos? Joffre survives as yet, and so does Von Hindenburg. Kitchener hangs by a thread. Sir John French, like many another, is in retirement, while the frightful slaughter at the Dardanelles, like that at Verdun, spells the shattering of many another reputation that deemed itself wise enough to lay down the law to civilians. The German General Staff—what has become of its certainty that it could take Paris in a month, that the raw levies of Kitchener would not fight, that Zeppelin raids over London would terrify the hearts of brave Englishmen? And what soldier truly foresaw trench warfare or the rise of the submarine or the invincibility of coast defences? Yet in this very hour, when the military the world over ought to be in the dust, we Americans are told that we must as blindly accept their decrees as did the poor, deluded German people in the years leading up to its present catastrophe. Critics are warned moreover not to point out that

every military or naval officer is a biased expert, since he never fails to urge more men and more ships to his own personal profit, for this is already beginning to smack of high treason. We are, of course, wholly certain that we can never be quite like the Germans; therefore, a military caste is quite unthinkable among us—and yet we have the word of the secretary of the navy that one high officer has told him that the only persons who are properly equipped to judge of the needs and conditions of the navy are officers whose fathers and grandfathers served in our fleet before them! Who is there who has come into contact with our navy life on its family and social side who has not been struck by its tendencies to snobishness and aristocracy?

The air has been full of charges during the passage of the Army bill by the Senate of the existence of two lobbies, that of the National Guard and that of those favoring a Continental army. Both sides seem to the outsider to have proved their charges as to the existence of those lobbies, in addition to the existence of the regular army one, which a Cabinet officer once described to me as "the ablest, the most dangerous, and the most successful" lobby that ever came to Washington. We are creating in the National Guard a political machine of such power that already regular army officers are asking whether Congress has not created a Frankenstein to destroy them. It is stated that every private in the Virginia militia wrote to Congressman Hay, and got others to, in favor of the militia plan, and particularly of the Federal Pay for the Militia bill. When we recall that this Army bill contains a clause undoing a half-century of reform by throwing open the civil service to all soldiers who can obtain the signatures of three officers to their certificate of good conduct, when we remember the influence exerted in the matter of earned and unearned pensions by the Grand Army of the Republic, we ought surely to ponder well the significance of what is going on under our eyes.

What it all means is that we are putting the emphasis upon the wrong things in life, on the old *destructive* military policy that holds out no hope for a better world, instead of on the *constructive* policy of facing squarely towards a world federation or at least the freeing of the world from the old fear of one nation by another, a world whose militarism is the most successful device yet invented by tyrants, like the Czar of Russia, for keeping their subjects despotically

enslaved. It is a militarism which eats up such vast treasures in wood and iron and steel as to make ridiculous even in our unprepared country any campaign for the preservation of national resources. What will that avail if our defence bill next year is to be more than half a billion of dollars?

Surely so intelligent a people as our own is not long thus to be deceived as to the significance of the new use of the old enslaving cries of patriotism, of national safety, of rallying about the flag. Nebraska and Michigan have just bid us believe that others will soon see how for us, too, the paths of military glory "lead but to the grave"—to the despair that wrings the hearts of Europe and of England for all who stop to think of the losses to the world from a war which could never have come but for the armies and navies built up for defensive purposes and the war-parties born of them, the real reason for which war no man knoweth. American sanity and intelligence will speedily see that the outcry for more soldiers and ships comes not from the masses of the people, but from the fortunate classes in life, and particularly from the very classes that have heretofore battened upon every special privilege. The coming of "preparedness" spells but a new phase of the old battle of democracy against privilege.

American sanity and intelligence and wisdom ought to see to it when the war excitement is over and news of preparedness is no longer featured in the press as once were the free-silver fallacy and the battles against the trusts and the railroads, that their government face the other way. Indeed, for right-thinking people this is the time to let the time-serving and compromising administration in Washington know that they expect of it the highest "preparedness" in the form of a readiness to take the lead at the peace conference in proposing international disarmament or in calling a conference for this purpose simultaneously with the peace conference. As Mr. Lansing and Mr. Wilson rise to this opportunity, so will their final standing be at the bar of history. It is idle to say that there are international problems beyond solution; that there is no way out of the present low estate of the world; that its animal passions cannot be checked. Behold in Paris there are now sitting the representatives of eight nations who are legislating not merely as to measures for carrying on the war against the Central Powers, but as to such questions as a joint-tariff system, low telephone and tele-

graph tolls, an international statute as to the licensing of corporations, as to bankruptcies, yes, even as to the losses resulting from the theft of bonds, and as to the false designation of merchandise.

Now, if these great nations can take time and thought in the middle of a war they believe to be one of life and death to legislate together as to these things, who shall say that after this frightful bloodshed they cannot be led by the great American Republic to legislate on other far more vital themes? He who doubts belongs in the class with those who despair of humanity, who see nothing to be gained by tackling world-old evils because they are old; who bow down before brute passion and would touch neither the Social Evil, nor any social evil, nor smallpox, nor cancer, nor crime, nor ignorance, nor poverty, because of their age.

Against the god of might; against the god of force; against the policy of murder of millions by millions, there will be American citizens to protest as long as there are stars in their courses. Against every preparation for war men henceforth will rise to say *no*, even with their backs to the wall and rifles in front of them. For there is no slavery in the world like this to arms, none that today so checks the growth of liberty, of democracy, of the coming of the kingdom of heaven on earth. They will bear readily and willingly imputations of fanciful, unpractical idealism, of lack of patriotism; only it must never be said of them that they were unfaithful to their faith or that they were ever at peace with militarism, or that they were afraid to die for their ideals, or that they were traitors to the Prince of Peace in thought or deed.